

GROSVENOR ESSAY NO. 7



THINKING THE
NICENE CREED:

Incarnation

The Doctrine Committee
of the Scottish Episcopal Church



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Grosvenor Essay No.7: Thinking the Nicene Creed: Incarnation

Preface

This series of essays continues to explore central issues in the life, thought and worship of the church today, and looks towards the future. It is based around the Nicene Creed – a fundamental part of the Eucharistic liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church, as it is for much of the wider catholic church. Here we shall be concerned with incarnation, a concept at the heart of the creed, and the key to the salvation which it promises to humanity. Why incarnation? Would it not be a good idea to free ourselves from some of these ancient formulations in the twenty-first century? This is a very fair question, and not a new one. To answer it we shall take a look at incarnation in the tradition and the contemporary life of our church.

The Eucharistic liturgy is a central part of the worship of the Scottish Episcopal Church, bearer of that sacramental tradition which complements the liturgy of the Word, and together they promise and they deliver to us that Sacramental Word which invites us to embrace salvation. Salvation is not just a verbal promise. It is embedded, concretised and instantiated in the material world of which we count ourselves a part. THE WORD BECAME FLESH. (John 1: 14). The word became human. All humanity is valuable in the sight of God because God himself has embraced humanity in all its forms. He has embraced life in all its experiences, death in its worst horrors, and out of this experience has brought salvation. This is what incarnation involves. It is central to the tradition of the gospel which the church lives and has relived in every generation in its own way from the time of the first Christians. This is why we call the tradition apostolic: it reminds us of the character of faithful discipleship.

But faithful discipleship is not served by mindless repetition. Radical discipleship is unafraid to try new pathways. If the old language has got to the stage of obscuring rather than illuminating the true meaning of incarnation, perhaps even immunising us against the risk-laden reality of incarnational discipleship, might it not be time to jettison the notion of incarnation in the name of true incarnation. This option was explored exhaustively by some scholars who were mainly devout Anglicans some years ago in a book entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977). The result was a fresh appreciation of many aspects of incarnation. But in

time there was a realisation of just how much that is vital to Christian life and action would be lost. Nevertheless, this movement among scholars and theologians was a valuable reminder that even key concepts cannot simply be taken for granted, precisely if they are to have the dynamic effects today that they had for their original creators. These papers are an attempt to encourage and invite readers to do just that for themselves.

In the Nicene Creed as used in the 1982 Scottish liturgy we say:

*For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary
and was made man.*

Incarnation is a word deeply embedded in Christian tradition. More recently it has been the subject of vigorous theological controversy. But whatever the advantages and disadvantages of the word “incarnation”, the substance of the matter has become fruitful as perhaps never before in contemporary Christian thought, action and engagement. That is why we believe it is worth continuing the long conversation about incarnation in the twenty first century. This is a conversation with consequences. Here are some suggestions for initiating such exchanges.

After this brief introduction to incarnation and its historical development, there follows a section on the biblical background, including reference to the Virgin Mary and the Virginal Conception. We then zoom in on a closer study of the key term *kenosis* (often translated as 'self-emptying') with particular reference to the marginalised. Next there is an section on the important topic of incarnation and gender. This constitutes Part 1 of the essay. Part 2 moves towards incarnation and sacrament. We look at the sacramental universe and incarnation with reference to science and to art. We discuss the incarnation as a pointer to the seminal importance of matter in Christian life. Part 3 of the essay and its conclusion focuses on pastoral aspects, notably one of the most basic issues for faith and spirituality – incarnation and the Eucharist. The final section concentrates on such key words as 'creation' and focusses on the sacramental and worshipping life of the Church in the light of God's faithfulness to all that is created.

God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. In the words of the Fourth Gospel, the Word became flesh and lived among us. God is here, among all the manifold everyday things of life, both simple and complex - the bus tickets, the credit cards, the takeaways and the takeovers, the politics and the economics. God is everywhere we are, and most importantly God is where the people are at the point of their greatest need. Incarnation as a dimension of the people's faith is central. Yet the concept itself is full of paradox - some critics would say contradictions, others would say mysteries. For the idea is not a trump card to resolve all problems. It is possible to think and act in profoundly incarnational ways without using the word incarnation, and it is equally possible to think and act with a lofty notion of incarnation in ways which actually mask and neglect the entire basic thrust of incarnation. That is why we are inviting you to share in our conversation. As with everything in Christian tradition, this is always an open conversation, always a beginning rather than an ending, but a conversation which focuses on one central reality, the faith that *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.*

Incarnations, as instances of the divine in human form, appear in various kinds, appearing, for example, in the avatars of deities in Hinduism. This is perhaps a useful reminder of the overarching unity of humanity in the sight of and in the care of God. The writings of the Hebrew Bible are concerned at different times and in different ways with the God who is not only profoundly transcendent but deeply immanent – God is creator of heaven and earth, but God is also in the midst of and active in the lives and affairs of the peoples, and perhaps especially the people of Israel. When we come to the New Testament we hit what we might see as one of the paradoxes. The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, which speak eloquently of the day to day life of Jesus in the world of fishing and fasting, do not use the concept of incarnation. For that we have to wait until the Fourth Gospel, John, seemingly the most theological of the gospels. "The word became flesh, and lived among us, and we saw his glory, full of grace and truth." It might seem that St. John's Gospel is furthest from the real world, and the others are more down to earth. Yet some scholars might argue the opposite. No gospel is more aware than that of John of the darkness in which the light shines. So much the worse for scholarship? For all the gospels narrate the story of the events concerning Jesus, his life, his death and his resurrection, his identification with his fellow human beings and his identification with God.

Here already the man Jesus and the Christ of faith are characterised in different ways. To understand this diversity the early Christian communities needed what theologians call a *Christology*, that is, a way of speaking about the mystery of Jesus Christ. Inevitably, and actually reflecting this diversity, they produced a number of different Christologies. For good and bad reasons there developed a tendency to search for the one correct Christology, and this search was to produce both gains and losses. Some versions were clearly less than adequate to express the central burden of the experience which is reflected in the early communities and their writings. The more acceptable versions took due account of the affirmation of the mystery of the incarnation. Jesus in the New Testament is portrayed as a man with a unique relationship to God, as Messiah, the Lord, the Word of God, the Servant of God, greatest of the prophets, the Christ. He sacrifices himself 'for us.' He is the mediator of the salvation which is expected in the Hebrew Bible. He is in various reflections and images at once shepherd, prophet, priest and king, witness to God, and a teacher.

As the churches began to consolidate into larger groups there developed a stream of reflection which we now recognise as a version of a doctrine of incarnation, and which became the major current among numerous other currents. It's worth pausing to set this out in some detail. In the incarnation, the embedding of the divine love in the created order, the full presence of the divine and so the unity of the divine and human in Jesus Christ takes place through a continuous giving on God's part and a continuous human receiving of that offering by Jesus. Jesus is the person he is only through a continuous receiving of God's gift: he receives it in a truly human way, in faith, prayer and obedience. In him, God comes into human existence, into vulnerability to temptation and openness to suffering and he does this through his divine power, the infinite assuming and entering into finitude for the salvation of humanity. This self-giving, of which only God is fully capable, is seen finally and most fully on the cross, for here self-giving is then brought to self-fulfilment in the resurrection.

For Jesus of Nazareth the meaning of the incarnation is that God the Father grants in him participation in his divine nature within the limitations of the human. Jesus participates in God's power to heal the sick, to forgive and to renew. In devoting himself to his father he receives the power to act in the way he does for the salvation of humanity. The full divinity of God is united with the man Jesus, but in such a way that the

divinity is not changed into humanity, and humankind is not in any way divinised. Jesus is at once the bearer of the presence of God and the medium of its hiddenness. The mystery of union is complex beyond our understanding, but we come to understand who Jesus was by looking at the pivotal events concerning his life and death. Through his life, death and resurrection there takes place a costly reconciliation, in which the relationship between God and humanity is renewed, to await the perfection of the eschatological peace of God at the end of all things.

All of this was to be disputed fiercely in the centuries which followed. Sadly the desire for doctrinal uniformity in the Church was to lead, then as now, to quarrels which negated the affirmation of unconditional love incarnate, and led to the suppression of minorities whose views were perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be inadequate. To kill a man, as was famously said, is not to defend a doctrine but to kill a man.

Let us try to put this history in a nutshell. While the *Docetists* emphasised the divine and spiritual rather than the earthly side of Jesus as the Christ, the *Ebionites* seem to have done the opposite – of course the eventual majority wrote the history. One of the earliest Christian apologists, Justin Martyr, saw Jesus as the eternal *logos* or word of God – the governing principle of the ancient universe. But the *logos* was then secondary to the Godhead.

The problem was how to express the affirmations which arose in the realm of worship in conceptual terms. All kinds of variations on the *logos* Christology arose. Paul of Samosata thought that the man Jesus united with the divine *logos* by willing the same things - one in will with God. His opponents argued that the very essence, and not just the will, of the *logos* is incarnate. But where in a human being do you locate essence? How could you combine the essence of the nature of God, who did not change, with the nature of a man, who was crucified, died and was buried?

The *Arians* pursued this line: the *logos* or Word suffered in Jesus' suffering, but God remained unchanged. How then could we be saved, if Jesus was not identified with us and with God in his humanity? Christ was the incarnate *Logos*. Christ was subject to change. Therefore, the *logos* was subject to change. But granting that God the creator could not suffer, that he did not change, the *logos* could not be identified with God.

Schools of theology in Antioch and Alexandria followed rival lines of argument. The Council of Nicaea (325) insisted that the *logos* or Son was of one essence or substance with the Father. The Cappadocians, Basil, Gregory and Gregory of Nazianzus refined the arguments, especially around the definitions over which the battle was mainly fought – substances, persons, natures.

In Gregory of Nazianzus' famous phrase, what is not assumed is not redeemed. If God himself did not come right into human life, then we remain imprisoned in our sins: in Pauline terms, the incarnation did not work. Aware of the difficulty, Apollinarius of Laodicea proposed that in the incarnate Christ the place of the human mind was occupied by the divine *Logos*. But within the current understanding of the human as body, soul and spirit, this looked like a diluted Christology.

Battle was often the appropriate word, for there were awesome geopolitical dimensions, as rival politicians and emperors hijacked the theological slogans. The definition agreed at the great Council of Chalcedon of 451 sealed the definitive understanding for much of Christendom – though again huge tracts of the known world were to disagree and often to pay dearly for their convictions. Two natures, divine and human, were affirmed so stressing the full humanity of Jesus. At the same time, Christ is only one person – though 'person' was not quite the same as the modern term 'personality'. Chalcedon was probably the best solution to the insoluble available, and was to last, in different formulations, more or less up to the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The meaning of Chalcedon remains hotly debated. The Cambridge theologian Sarah Coakley (at last a female name) has described the Definition as a kind of horizon from which the mystery may best be imagined.

Thinking about incarnation went on. The Christologies of the West, following Augustine, tended to be interested not so much in the nature and person of Christ as in the salvation brought by Christ to humanity. Luther asked 'How can I find a gracious God?', and the Reformers concentrated on the nature of the gift of divine presence, especially in the Eucharist. Luther followed the early Church Fathers in stressing the exchange of divine and human attributes in Christ, while Calvin stressed the divine transcendence. The Lutheran tradition developed a new Christology of the two states of Christ's humiliation and exaltation in the

cross and resurrection, leading to further reflection on *kenosis* or self-emptying, in Jesus and in God.

The European Enlightenment brought a new stress on history and the historical Jesus as the key to the understanding of the mystery rather than traditional metaphysics – though of course all discussion of ultimates has metaphysical dimensions. Jesus is typically seen, in the tradition of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, as a man of pure compassion and kindness, who sets a moral example in all that he does, and is God for us. In Britain in the nineteenth century, incarnation rather than atonement was often the preferred way into the understanding of reconciliation, salvation and the implications for discipleship in social outreach. The twentieth century brought the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, who returned to reaffirmation of Chalcedon, and Rudolf Bultmann, whose existential interpretation of the Word stressed the mythological rather than historical nature of much of the New Testament. Recent interpretations have seen Jesus as the key to faith, to hope, to history, to cosmic process, to science and to art. Rahner saw Jesus as the ideal form of humanity and Schillebeeckx as the key to Christian experience.

Every age thinks that its own preferred interpretation most faithfully reflects, at least in an indirect way, the original interpretation – and that is of course a legitimate aspiration. In the twenty first century the Christologies of the emancipatory theologies - liberation, post-colonial, feminist, gay and lesbian, black and Asian, human rights - have come to complement and challenge the prevailing perspectives.

Reflection on incarnation is a rich and always changing development in the stream of Christian faith. But that does not mean that we can't try to find some ways of expressing it. Let us imagine an account along these lines. The parables of Jesus, his life and his teaching, are *the* examples for Christians of self-giving love. Self-giving (*kenosis*) is incarnation and service is the way of the cross. Through the suffering humanity of Jesus Christ in humiliation comes resurrection. God is compassionate and creates compassion in us. Jesus Christ is God for us, answering God's self-emptying in his own life of sacrificial love, a love eschatologically effective through resurrection. Such an account says more than a little about Jesus, about God and humanity, and the way of discipleship in the world today, and most Christians might agree with it. The task of constantly improving our understanding is left to us all to work out in creative tension and conversation. This diversity may be no bad

thing. In any case, however we come to think of incarnation, the decisive issue is how we seek to implement this understanding through engagement in the complex globalized world in which we live. This might be a Christomorphic, incarnational response to the challenge of the form of Christ in the world. Now it is time to attempt to open out further the rich variety of some Christian reflections on incarnation.

PART ONE

1. The Virgin Birth

The creedal statement concerning the birth of Jesus to a virgin, whatever one's belief in it as an historical event, affirms something extremely important in our Christian faith. That is, the initiative for the incarnation lies wholly with God from the very beginning of Jesus' earthly existence, though at the same time he is like us, born of the flesh – the Greek word used in the Fourth Gospel is *sarx*, a deliberately blunt term.

The creeds stipulate that Jesus was “enfleshed from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin” — but as familiar as this claim has become, it rests on a relatively small textual base. Only Matthew and Luke seem to characterise Mary as a virgin, and no other New Testament text betrays explicit awareness that such a claim might be made at all. Important as this doctrine may have become as the patristic theologians articulated the church's teaching about christology, the biblical texts do not treat Mary's virginity as a theological shibboleth. The theological weight that the Virgin Birth has come to bear tends to overshadow the sorts of claims that Matthew and Luke were probably making, and also the ways that the other New Testament documents could articulate entirely sound christologies without invoking the Virgin Birth.

The Old Testament shows no proleptic investment in the sorts of theological assessments of [women's] virginity that would later coalesce around the birth of Jesus. Virginity was the normative expectation of marriageable women, and the laws concerning marriage function to ensure the young woman's orderly transition from unmarried virginity to married childbearing. But these texts do not evince a strong interest in lasting virginity as an especially pure or holy condition; indeed, since God instructs humanity to be fruitful and multiply, and since marriage and reproduction were integral expectations for maintaining the family-based social and economic structure of Israel, we would not expect to find the Old Testament placing a distinctly high value on virginity over and above its importance as the condition previous to first marriage.

In this context, the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 seems, in its original context, much more likely to involve the prediction that a woman in the court who was unmarried at the moment, would, in a short while become

pregnant (with no apparent stipulation that she not marry in the interval). Even the transition from Hebrew to the Greek word *parthenos* need not require that Greek readers understand the mother in question as being a virgin when she gave birth; the attested use of *parthenos* for ‘maiden’ allowed the possible use of the word for a young woman whom one would expect to be a virgin even if she was known to have engaged in sexual intercourse. So — for a variety of reasons — a contemporary reader of Isaiah 7 (‘contemporary’ with either the Hebrew or the Septuagint versions) would have very little reason to suppose that it anticipated that one day, hundreds of years later, a woman who had never had sexual contact would give birth to a regal son, though the question remains why the evangelist (perhaps uniquely) interprets the text of Isaiah in the way that he does.

The Gospel of Matthew depicts the birth of Jesus in a context determined by the genealogy (on one hand) and the demonstration of Joseph’s rectitude (on the other). With regard to the former, Matthew draws the line of narrative from the line of descent directly to a focus on Joseph and his rôle in the engagement and birth. When Joseph learns of Mary’s pregnancy, he receives an angelic reassurance; and the angel’s message to him stipulates nothing about Mary’s virginity *per se*: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Mary’s virginity comes into view only when the narrator explains that all this took place in order to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy.

The tenor of the narrative tends less to call attention to Mary’s condition (though the remarkable circumstance of her virginity certainly will have impressed the audience’s attention) than to assure readers that Jesus actually was the heir of Joseph, and that Joseph acted in accordance with the Torah and God’s instruction.

Whereas Matthew stresses the importance of Joseph’s ancestry and righteousness in the birth narrative, Luke draws more attention to the remarkable role of Mary in the chain of events. Not only does Mary occupy centre stage at the Annunciation and birth of Jesus, she also appears with Elizabeth at the Visitation, and continues more prominent than Joseph in the stories of the Presentation and of Jesus’ dawdling in the temple, “treasuring these things in her heart.”

Luke's version of the birth narrative *highlights* Mary's virginity: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (more precisely, "since I have not known a man?"). To this, Gabriel responds that Mary will conceive through the unmediated action of the Holy Spirit — a very different exposition from Matthew's. Luke's depiction of the conception of Jesus fits more credibly in the cultural encyclopaedia of the Gentile world, where "sons of God" commonly resulted from liaisons between deities and humans. Luke differentiates Mary's participation in the conception of Jesus from the more carnal (and less consensual) examples from Graeco-Roman mythology, but the broader frame of Luke's story about a divine-human conception speaks intelligibly to Luke's Gentile audience, just as Matthew's story of a prophesied birth to a righteous, regal family speaks to Matthew's Judaic audience.

No other New Testament text identifies Mary as a virgin, and such passages as may imply something distinctive about Jesus' birth (Mark 6:3, for example) are at best ambiguous. None of these bears exegetical or theological freight with regard to Mary's virginity. John's characterisation of the Word made flesh makes no reference to Mary's condition, nor does Paul's poetic summary of Jesus' incarnation in Philippians.

For instance, in Romans 1, Paul identifies Jesus as having been "descended from David according to the flesh, and..... declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (1:3f). Not only does Paul omit any mention of the virgin birth, he specifies that Jesus was "descended from David according to the flesh" — a stipulation that does not explicitly agree with Matthew's and Luke's account of Joseph's non-involvement in the conception of Jesus according to the flesh. One can certainly develop an explanation for this formulation, but it is true at the least that Paul displays no indication that he knows of the virgin birth here. The Letter to the Hebrews, which affirms Jesus' having been begotten by God (1:5), shows no interest in Jesus' physical ancestry (although it characterizes Melchizedek as "without father, without mother, without genealogy," thereby "resembling the Son of God" (7:3). Much as the theological significance of Jesus' birth from a virgin might have advanced the argument of Hebrews, the letter shows no awareness of this topic.

This matters particularly because it means that every New Testament writer other than Luke and Matthew sensed that it was

possible to characterise Jesus satisfactorily without citing his birth from a virgin. Indeed, since the earliest explicit indications that anyone supposed Jesus to have been born of a virgin — Matthew and Luke — appear (probably) in the 80s of the 1st century, a fair portion of the New Testament may have composed before most people even knew of the possibility that he had been so born. And since other New Testament texts were promulgated (probably) after Matthew and Luke, their silence on the topic of Mary's virginity testifies to the authors' confidence that the saving truth about Jesus need not include specific, definite reference to the Virgin Birth.

The New Testament bears a complex relation to physical embodiment. This complexity is generated, to some extent, by the anthropology presupposed by many NT authors: humans, on this account, are constituted by flesh, and soul, and spirit. These three constituent elements do not map conveniently onto more familiar contrasts of physical/spiritual or body/soul. Moreover, some NT texts seem to treat the physical manifestation of identity as intrinsically problematic (disciples "become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12f; "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God," 1 Cor 15:50; and numerous passages that inveigh against desires of the flesh). As a result, a strong interpretive tradition has plausibly ascribed to the NT a bias against materiality and physical existence.

On the other hand, the same New Testament texts that call 'fleshly' existence into question offer an alternative that itself bespeaks a positive view of incarnation. The resurrection stories in Matthew, Luke, and John underscore the difference between Jesus' risen body, and the immaterial apparition of a phantasm. Although Johannine Christians are not born from the will of the flesh, the Johannine Word *became flesh* and in so doing enabled embodied humans to attain fuller life by sharing in his Spirit. Paul struggles in 1 Corinthians 15 to explain to his audience how it can be that we will be raised *bodily*, but not *carnally*. His answer — that we will be raised as spiritual bodies, whose specific qualities remain concealed from us now — may not satisfy readers, but at the very least they indicate that Paul envisions bodily existence as good. He not only posits the goodness of eschatological spiritual bodies, but allows that our temporal bodies may be put to good use as long as we orient them toward glorifying God and toward displaying God's grace at work in us.

This makes of our bodies “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1).

The paradigmatic positive example of bodily existence is, of course, Jesus Christ. His human life both illustrates the possibility of living in accordance with God’s will, being led by the Spirit, and also makes possible our sharing of his mortal participation in the imperishable divine life. Our theological account of bodiliness can ignore neither the very real physical and moral limitations of existence according to the flesh, nor the transformed character of bodily life – Christianity has always emphasized the resurrection of the body and not just the spirit - when it is interwoven (‘incorporated’) into the life of Christ. Paul’s lambent Christological poem of Philippians 2:5-11:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Theological deliberations subsequent to the composition of the New Testament placed increasing emphasis on the Virgin Birth as an element of sound Christology, as a sign of Jesus’ unique metaphysical status, and as a credendum for true belief. The standing of these later arguments should be assessed on their own merits, and the delay of interest in Mary’s virginity does not prove that such interest was misguided. Consideration of the topic of the Virgin Birth should, however, proceed without presupposing that the New Testament itself invests in the historicity of obstetric claims about the Blessed Virgin. The New Testament witnesses throughout, however, to the paramount importance of Jesus’ bodily existence for our own lives. Although we experience the

flesh's constraints in every facet of our life, by uniting ourselves with Christ through baptism and communion we align ourselves with his triumph over the will and the destiny of the flesh. We may thus begin a transformation from earthly bodies with lives limited by frailty, desire, and death, to share in a spiritual body defined by its participation in divine strength and holiness.

2. "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave."

In Philippians 2:6-7 we read:

*Who, though he was in the form of God,
Did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.*

The keyword in this much debated hymn or poem (thought by many scholars since Lohmeyer in 1928 to have been quoted by Paul from an earlier already existing hymn) is the verb *ekenosen*, "he emptied himself", or "he made himself of no effect". As a description of the incarnation the precise meaning of this is debated. Does such 'self-emptying' involve a real abandonment of the nature of God? Lutheran theology, especially in the nineteenth century, has suggested that in order to become human, the Divine Son abandoned in the temporal sphere his attributes of deity - omnipotence, omniscience and cosmic sovereignty, a theology later followed by a number of Scottish theologians. More moderately within Anglicanism, Charles Gore in his Bampton Lectures published as *Dissertations on Subjects connected with the Incarnation* (1895), suggested, and with no complete clarity, that in the incarnation there are two spheres for the activities of the Son, one in which all divine powers were retained, and the other which restrained its activity to allow the existence of a limited and therefore genuinely human consciousness in the Lord.

In patristic theology the term *kenosis* (drawing on the term used in Philippians) was employed to describe the action of the Son in the incarnation, but this then implied no special theory. For the Greek Fathers 'incarnation' and 'kenosis' were more or less equivalent terms.

As one scholar has recently expressed it: "To incarnate. To empty. When the Word became flesh, divinity did not fill up with matter nor did matter fill up with divinity." (Marie-Jose Baudinet, "The Face of Christ, the Form of the Church", in Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, edited, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part One [Zone, 1989], p.151). Baudinet links this specifically with the image of the icon in which "the image of Christ is empty of His presence and full of his absence."

As a memorial of the Incarnation, the icon is, therefore, a memorial of *kenosis* that poses the problem of the line's infinity. For some, *kenosis* is only an act of divine condescension designating the Messiah's humility, poverty and nakedness. In short, *kenosis* is, in the context of the great economist's expenditure, the sacrifice of the Father who exiles His Son from His glory during His earthly life. This does not mean that the Son ceases to participate in the Father's glory, but, rather, that He renounces making it visible. The *akmē* of *kenosis* undoubtedly occurred at the moment of Christ's supreme triumph and absolute dereliction, the moment of his death on the Cross when He cried out, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Baudinet, 151).

Kenosis thus links the beginning of Christ's incarnation in the absolute poverty of the stable with the end in the utter abandonment on the cross. A visual meditation on the simultaneity of these two moments in the drama of salvation can be found in the small Rembrandt painting in the Hunterian Art Gallery in the University of Glasgow entitled *The Entombment of Christ*. The dead body of the Christ is about to be placed in the tomb, figures of women at the head with a number of figures standing elsewhere to the right, including one in rich robes, one supposes Joseph of Arimathea. In the bottom right hand corner there is a shadowy kneeling figure, calling us all, as it were, to worship. The tomb itself is presented as a shadowy cavern in which are seen mysterious shapes reminiscent of animal heads. In short, the whole scene is simultaneously reminiscent to the viewer of the Nativity - the tomb also the stable, the women very like the figure of Mary in the traditional crib tableau, while Joseph of Arimathea reminds us of one of the rich figures of the Kings from the East. In a single image the artist presents both the birth and death of Christ in their poverty not as distinct but as simultaneous in the narrative of salvation.

But we need now to return to the poem of Philippians 2 and the metaphoric character of the term *ekenosen*. It was John Chrysostom in the fourth century who first suggested the Old Testament source for this passage, reading it as a parable of a self-humbling king's son. The Greek of the passage is undeniably problematic and even vague. The term *morphe* ("taking the *form* of a slave") implies more than mere outward shape, though *schema* ("being found in *human form*") does mean shape. Why does the term 'slave' take precedence over human status? Probably the best answer links the hymn with the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah 53, an important figure in the literature of the New Testament. (Interestingly other New Testament references to the Suffering Servant seem to draw on the Greek of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, while the odd vocabulary here seems to be closer to an older Hebrew original - further evidence that Paul was using an earlier and very ancient hymn.)

Certainly to read this Pauline hymn in the context of Isaiah 52-3 makes good sense, referring it back, therefore, to the role of the king in the pre-exilic cult of Israel. The term 'slave' then, is to be understood not so much in the manner of the slaves of the Graeco-Roman world, but as a reference to the royal Son and Servant of the divine King, living and dying in obedience - as Chrysostom suggested. In Robert Murray's words: "Christ's 'self-emptying', like that of the Isaian servant, bears an implication of *sacrificial* self-giving, lived out physically on earth, but also revealing a quality intrinsic to divine love." In consequence of Christ's humility (compare vv. 2: 3, in which Paul enjoins the quality of humility upon every Christian), God honours him (v. 9) superlatively, though the 'exaltation' mentioned here is not explicitly a reference to the resurrection itself, but rather to the honour granted to him through the entire mystery of the incarnation.

Kenosis is thus to be seen as a complex term which lies at the very heart of the Christological mystery as it was to be debated, as we have seen, over the coming centuries of the Christian Church up to the Council of Chalcedon, and one rooted in the very earliest of Christian formulations, earlier, perhaps, even than the writings of St. Paul himself. The Nicene Creed touches on it only with the utmost lightness in the phrase "he came down from heaven", an act of descent at the heart of divine love done for two reasons alone: for the sake of humankind, and for their salvation.

3. Incarnation and Gender

A few years ago, a member of my congregation, on finding herself pregnant, also found herself losing her faith. God seemed increasingly irrelevant to her growing experience of motherhood. It wasn't that she thought God was male, she was not literally minded. But symbolism affects our thoughts at a non-literal level, and she, along with many women and men, was struggling with the symbolism of God as Father, with the lack of a viable role-model in Mary as mother, and with the maleness of the flesh that God's 'Son' became. God in 'his maleness' came to seem remote, and was, at least for a time, unwanted.

The maleness of Jesus and the 'Fatherhood' of God have between them encouraged the conception that men are closer to God, or more in the image of God, than women: as Milton puts it in *Paradise Lost*, "He for God only, she for God in him,"(IV.299). God's incarnate form "gives a male human being a status which is given to no woman", writes the post-feminist theologian Daphne Hampson, and the resultant disparity has caused problems on various levels (though a distinction between levels barely holds up, as one set of problems runs into another).

First, symbolically Jesus' maleness reinforces the predominance and normality of the male, and hence the otherness of the female. Herein lies the potential for women to feel physically wrong and spiritually alienated. This is a problem that the Church has always needed to resist. In the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says to Peter about Mary Magdalene: 'I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven' (Gos. Thom. 114). Consider the practice of some Medieval religious women who starved themselves to the point of halting menstruation, in order (according to Caroline Walker Bynum in her book *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*) to rid themselves of female uncleanness. Consider also what sometimes happens when women, because of pregnancy or other experiences, find their femaleness becoming central and, by that token, find God's relevance displaced. Janet Soskice helpfully asks: if "Whoever follows Christ, the perfect man, himself becomes more of a man" (*Gaudium et Spes*), does Christ make woman more fully clear to herself, not only in those aspects she shares with males, but also in her mothering, her loving and her sense of her own embodiment? We hope we can arrive at

the answer 'yes', but we might do so only by first being realistic about the obstacles.

Second, historically, the life Jesus lived was that of a boy and a man, not of a girl and a woman. Of course there is a whole range of non-gender specific experiences which Jesus did not undergo, including parenthood, old-age, marriage, genocide, slavery, and sexual abuse. But Jesus' maleness is felt to be problematic for women if and when it is held by the Church to be theologically significant, and especially when it has led to the sanctioning or ignoring of female exclusion and abuse. For example, there are churches across the world that promote a model of Christian family in which men are the 'boss' or the 'chief' in their homes, following an argument that as Christ is Head of the Church, men are head of their women; as one husband put it, "I am Christ Almighty in my own house". Of course, he is a buffoon, but the repercussions of his way of thinking are very grave, especially where women and children are maltreated by their menfolk; and statistics show that abuse is rife in strict religious households. "You shouldn't leave your husband" one woman said to Holly Wagner Green, a battered wife who was looking for solace in her church, "No matter what he does to you, God put him in charge of you....." "That's right", another woman added, "God made him your lord and master. Even if he tells you to jump out of the window, you should do it. If God wants you or your baby to live, don't worry. He'll protect you somehow."

Third, when the maleness of Jesus is held to be theologically significant, the teaching that all of humanity is represented by and in Jesus Christ is put under strain. Women are not able to represent Jesus in authoritative or sacramental roles, and it becomes questioned how far Jesus is able to represent women. The then Bishop of London, Graham Leonard, in his speech against the ordination of women to the General Synod of the Church of England in 1978 asserted that "the Scriptures speak of God as Father, that Christ was incarnate as male, that he chose men to be his apostles...not because of social conditioning, but because in the order of creation headship and authority is symbolically and fundamentally associated with maleness". He argued that maleness represents authority and femininity represents obedience: "mankind and the Church is presented as feminine to God, to whom our response must be one of obedience...For a woman to represent the Headship of Christ and the Divine Initiative would, unless her feminine gifts were obscured or minimized, evoke a different approach to God from those who worship" (Speech to the General Synod of the Church of England, 8 November, 1978).

Leonard's argument turns on two premises: that females best symbolise the state of obedience, and that obedience is not a fitting state for God. As we've already seen, the same view, in other people's minds, sanctions domestic abuse. In Leonard's mind, presumably, he is drawing on an argument of Thomas Aquinas, that a woman cannot receive the character of ordination because the state of a woman is that of subjection – a view Aquinas derived from the Aristotelian biology he inherited. We now know that Aristotelian biology is wrong, that ascribing to women a status of subjection is dangerous, and that speaking about maleness and femaleness in a reified way is naïve. But we can also turn the tables on arguments that disable women from representing God on the grounds of their supposed feminine submissive nature. God's revelation in Christ shows God entering into a state of obedience; God incarnate submits himself to 'the Father', and is obedient even unto death. Hence, the very act of the Word becoming Flesh, according to dubious ways of thinking that equate femininity with subjection, is a rather 'feminine' one.

The Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, put forward similar arguments to those of Graham Leonard. His model of humanity is based on an understanding of the female as primarily receptive and the male as active. He opposed the ordination of women on the grounds that priests act on the part of God in giving rather than in receiving. His arguments informed Pope John Paul II and underlie the current Roman Catholic opposition to women's ordination. Yet, while Balthasar models gender in terms of activity and receptivity, he also regards giving and receiving as constitutive of the Trinity, such that the self-giving and pouring out manifested on the cross and on Holy Saturday reveal the inner-trinitarian relations of giving and receiving. Thus he seems to bring 'feminine' (as he conceives them) qualities into the Godhead, and develops a Christology that understand Jesus Christ, and consequently humanity, as constituted in relation. Balthasar is an ambiguous theologian for many women because his over-simplified way of speaking about gender is unhelpful, even while it informs a relational, and thereby less-hierarchical, way of writing about the Trinity.

We may well feel, by now, that we are having a silly argument about male and female nature, and be wondering how we got sucked into it. We get into such debates when women are held at one remove; when the idea takes hold that Jesus does not represent women as closely as he represents men, and that thereby women cannot represent him. When women get on with claiming Jesus for themselves, most of the problems

considered above dissipate. The Black womanist theologian, Jacquelyn Grant, finds no difficulty identifying with Jesus Christ, because she finds Jesus strongly identifying with people like her: "Jesus Christ...identifies with the 'little people', Black women, where they are;...he affirms the basic humanity of these, 'the least'; and.....he inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence". And she quotes the prayers of black slave women; among them this prayer:

Come to we, dear Massa Jesus. De sun, he hot too much, de road am dat long and boggy and we ain't got no buggy for send and fetch Ooner [you]. But Massa, you 'member how you walked dat hard walk up Calvary and ain't weary for to come to we. We pick out de torns, de prickles, de brier, de backslidin' and de quarrel and de sin out of you path so dey shan't hurt Ooner pierce feet no more.

This prayer not only shows women identifying very strongly with Jesus, but also shows women finding authority from a place of subjection to act on behalf of Jesus in removing thorns, quarrels and sin from his path.

Black and other liberationist theologies have mirrored to white churches the ways in which we all play with the image of Jesus. Our theology invites us to play: because we understand that Jesus Christ is for all human flesh, and indeed for the whole of creation, we conceive of Jesus, especially Jesus on the Cross, in all sorts of ways that are not historically accurate but which convey theological truth. We play with the notion that Jesus is black or white, Polynesian or Indian; that on the cross he is kingly and calmly victorious, or that he is tortured or like a victim of genocide. We sometimes also play with the idea that Jesus on the Cross is female, a *Christa*, but this somehow is more complicated and more resisted than our other theological imaginings. For some people, it is a step too far in straying from the historical truth about Jesus; why this should be so sends us back into the array of problems surveyed earlier. For others, it brings into sharp focus the abuse of women, in a way that might even suggest divine sanction. For others still, the image of *Christa* is a healing image.

Is it possible theologically to interpret the incarnation in ways that heal rather than exacerbate disparities between women and men? At risk of over-generalising, it can be helpful to trace three routes taken by theologians:

- i. to focus on Jesus' message
- ii. to focus on his common humanity
- iii focus on his divinity

i. If the teachings of Jesus and the way that he lived and died carry the full significance of his work, issues about Jesus' maleness may not arise. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, focuses on Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, which she understands principally in terms of a just social order. Such a focus removes attention from the gender, or indeed the nature of Jesus, and helps us to focus on the oppressed. Since many women are amongst the poorest of the poor, women are not marginalised within such an understanding of Christ's significance. The question arises, however, whether this route really is incarnational, for any human being who lived and died and taught as Jesus did, would carry the same significance.

ii. It is possible both to hold that Jesus is God incarnate, and to focus on the humanity that Jesus' shares with us. Carter Heyward exemplifies such a view: "Am I denying the divinity of JESUS? No. I am denying the singularity of his status as the Son of God. I am affirming the presence of divinity in him and moving through him...I have no doubt that you and I are as much God's daughters and sons as JESUS was and, moreover, that this has been true not only of human beings but of other creatures too, from the beginning". Nikos Kazantzakis puts a parable into Jesus' mouth, in his novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which paints a similar picture. In this parable Jesus is replying to an old man who cries "Why doesn't God show himself?". "Then - listen, old man", Jesus replies, "God became a piece of bread, a cup of cool water, a warm tunic, a hut and, in front of the hut, a woman nursing an infant." "Thank you, Lord," the old man whispered. "You humbled yourself for my sake. You became bread, water, a warm tunic and a wife and a child in order that I might see you. And I did see you. I bow down and worship your beloved many-faced face."

This route, which focuses on Jesus' common humanity and the divine in all of us, tempers the difficulty that God is uniquely revealed in a male human being. But it suffers the same difficulty, so far as incarnational theology is concerned, as route i.: that what Christ reveals is something that could potentially be learned without him. Our transformation into people of liberative hope and mutuality is effected through our eyes and hearts being opened, but is in principle possible

irrespective of God becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, the transformation envisaged points to a better future social-ecological order, but doesn't address the sufferings too long past for we ourselves to heal. Christian hope is for the taking up and healing of all of history, which we cannot achieve simply by the conversion of our hearts and minds. God needs to heal God's own world, which is why Christians arrived at the confession that God became human so that we might become divine; that God took on flesh that all creation might be restored. The incarnation calls us not simply to realise what has been there all along, but to see a new thing God is doing. God is reaching in a new way in to the world of flesh so that the world of flesh might participate in the life of God.

iii. A third route is to focus on the divinity of God incarnate, in such a way that the maleness of Jesus of Nazareth pales into insignificance when one considers the cosmic Christ who incorporates feminine qualities and is somehow, as we affirm of God, beyond gender. An emphasis within such a Christology (e.g. as put forward by Patricia Wilson Kastner) is that alienation is overcome in Christ somehow at the very level of being, and not just through the message of Jesus. It is possible, and unhelpful, to hold such a Christology naively, as though sexual difference does not matter in the risen Christ and therefore should not matter to us. The fact is that Christ was incarnate as male, and also that this has had an impact upon relations between women and men within the Church and Christian cultures. Acknowledging that this is so, many Christians (and also non-Christian feminists) have found it helpful to focus on the Christ who is beyond a particular male form. "The whole history of the world is a gigantic movement of incarnation which is fulfilled in Christ", writes the French Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clement, "God made flesh, God made earth, assuming the maximum of humanity, freeing the prayer of the universe in such a way that bread is his body and wine his blood". Significantly, an emphasis on Christ as beyond gender, or as encompassing male and female gender, brings us back to the body of Jesus of Nazareth. From at least Medieval times through to the insights of the Franco-phone feminist Julia Kristeva, Jesus' body has been understood to do what female bodies do: to bleed, to provide or constitute food, and to give birth to new life.

Jesus' maleness will always present some difficulty for feminist analysis, but Jesus presents difficulties for every analysis, even those we may think are on the side of the angels. His unapologetic maleness is yet another obstacle to our being able to contain and tame him. We do not

want him tamed, and even if we did, there is nothing we could do about that. We want the Church not to use his maleness against women, so that the work of the Gospel that ensues when women claim Christ for themselves, is not impeded.

PART TWO

4. “In Favour of Materialism?”

To begin our exploration of this subject, let us first remind ourselves again why, according to the Creed, the second person of the Godhead came into the world:

*For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.*

Interestingly, the Creed is worded in such a way that it could be construed as suggesting *two* distinct reasons for the incarnation: it was ‘for us men’ and ‘for our salvation’. The second part of this affirmation is well known: Jesus came to save us from our sins. This is probably the part that we actually *hear* when we recite the Creed. For most of us most of the time, the first part, ‘for us men ...’, appears redundant. Indeed, the modern practice of saying ‘For us and for our salvation ...’ encourages us to hear the Creed in a foreshortened fashion – the modern version is really no different from saying ‘for our salvation he came down from heaven.’

This change of wording is motivated entirely properly by the desire for a gender-neutral language. But in so far as it encourages us not to heed the first half of what was originally a bipartite affirmation, something important is quite possibly lost. The original formulation of the Creed at least suggests that second person of the Trinity came into the world ‘for us men’, quite independently of the fact that these ‘men’ may need ‘salvation’. The English word ‘men’ translates the Greek *anthropoi*. In this context in both languages, the word refers to human beings in general (rather than a plurality of males). In other words, Jesus came into the world for us *as humans*, in our human condition, irrespective of our need for salvation from sin.

Significantly, it is the very *materiality* of our human condition that is emphasized a little further on in the Creed when the plural *anthropoi* (men) becomes singular: the second person of the Trinity ‘became

incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man (Gk. *anthropos*)'. The word describing this miracle, 'incarnate', has become so commonplace that it no longer shocks us. It came to us through the Latin *incarnatus*, which in turns translates the Greek (used in the Creed) *sarkōthenta*. Etymologically, both words mean 'enfleshed'. Here, both Greek and Latin theological vocabulary faithfully reflects the usage of the first great theologian of the incarnation, St. John, who wrote in the prologue of his Gospel: "And the word became flesh (Gk. *sarx*) and dwelt among us ... We beheld his glory (Gk. *doxa*) ..." (John 1:14)

John need not have used the word *sarx*. He could, for example, have said 'the word became a living soul' (Gk. *psuchē zōsa*), which would have nicely echoed Genesis 2:7, where Adam 'became a living soul' when Yahweh breathed into him. But John apparently chose a word that (as with its English equivalent) included 'meat' in its range of meaning, with the associated connotation of death (cf. the English word 'sarcophagus', from the Greek belief in a flesh (sarco-) eating (-phagos) stone). It was, as many commentators have pointed out, a shocking word choice. C. K. Barrett took it as describing human nature "in the harshest available terms". Rudolf Bultmann went further, and called the use of *sarx* an 'offence', especially when put next to *doxa*, 'glory'. Archbishop William Temple in his Glasgow Gifford Lectures opined that *sarx* "was, no doubt, chosen because of its specially materialistic associations."

So when the Creed says "For us men (= humans) and for our salvation ... he became incarnate (= enfleshed) and was made man", it is the very materiality of our human condition that comes to the fore. For us humans (*anthropoi*) in our material condition (*sarx*), the second person of the Trinity took on materiality (*sarkōthenta*), and became one of us (*anthropos*) in this condition.

Note that this materiality is *not* the result of sin. Materiality is of the essence of the human condition in a way that sin is not. Indeed, there has long been a minority tradition in Christian theology that affirms that the incarnation was not 'an afterthought of the Fall'. That is to say, even without sin, the incarnation would have happened. Quite independently of sin, the second person of the Trinity took on materiality in order to *fulfil* the purpose of the material creation, namely, to be 'deified' (a favourite term with some Eastern Orthodox theologians). A number of texts in the New Testament encourage this line of thinking. Perhaps the most explicit comes from the middle of the opening prayer in the letter to the

Ephesians, where the author lays out God's ultimate 'plan for the fullness of time', namely, "to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10) In other words, God's plan is that all created things should find their fulfilment in Christ, the enfleshed one.

A number of important implications follow from this reading of the Creed and of the New Testament. One of the most brilliant attempts at spelling out a basic implication was made long ago by John of Damascus (ca. 676 – 749) in the midst of one of the bitterest theological controversies in Christian history. The controversy was about the use of artistic representations of Jesus, icons, in Christian worship. While both sides of the controversy, the Iconoclasts (*con*) and Iconodules (*pro*), were united against a superstitious veneration of the icon, the Iconoclasts were against *all* artful representations of Christ. They entertained such fundamental doubts about the suitability of material 'stuff' to bear and reveal divinity that, for them, when the Word became *sarx*, the *sarx* could no longer really be 'ordinary' *sarx* at all; it must have become some 'divinised *sarx*' appropriate to the second person of the Trinity. Therefore any imaging of Jesus in material form is more than unsuitable; it is, quite literally, impossible. Such iconoclastic theology drew forth a wave of brilliant defence of icons, with the latter ultimately becoming the accepted position in the Eastern Church.

Interestingly, iconodule theologians, that is, those who support the use of icons, saw quite clearly that the controversy was in fact about 'stuff', about the matter of *sarx*. As Aidan Nichols pointed out in his masterful study *The Art of God Incarnate*, the Iconodule believed that the 'enfleshment' of the Word brought about a fundamental transformation of the relationship between God and the material world. We can say that if the Word took flesh, then 'matter matters'! John of Damascus puts it memorably:

Now that God has appeared in the flesh and lived among men, I make an image of the God who can be seen. I do not venerate matter, but I venerate the Creator of matter, who for my sake became material and deigned to dwell in matter, who through matter effected my salvation, ... matter, filled with divine power and grace.

Interestingly therefore (in the words of the noted Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner), Christians are (or at least should be) "the most

sublime of materialists”. We believe that matter matters, because it matters to God, who has planned a future for the material creation – to be gathered up into the Incarnate One. As Denis Edwards, another Roman Catholic theologian, puts it, “matter is not something to be cast aside as a transitory part of the journey of the spirit”.

This means that Christians should have no truck with any form of dualism, which elevates the ‘spiritual’ at the expense of the ‘material’. To all dualists, St. John (and the Nicene Creed, which essentially follows his wording) retorts that “The word became *sarx* ... and we have beheld his glory (*doxa*).” And, as Bultmann says, “[this] *doxa* is not to be seen *alongside* the *sarx*, nor *through* the *sarx* as through a window; it is to be seen in the *sarx* and nowhere else. If [we wish] to see the *doxa*, then it is on the *sarx* that [we] must concentrate [our] attention ...’

Historically, dualism has caused much grief to the Church. For example, dualistic Iconoclasts could have smothered a nascent Christian art. But in the West today, the undervaluing of matter is not the main problem. On the contrary, we are living in the grip of materialism: stuff, ‘brute matter’, is all that there is. The scientist tells us how matter works, and technologists (including medics) show us how matter can be manipulated to our advantage. That’s all.

It can be argued that we have ended up in this place partly because Western churches have, despite having the incarnation in the centre of our faith, largely been under the grip of dualism. A Church who does not believe that ‘matter matters’ will, and in fact has, abandoned the material world of *sarx* as simply ‘so much brute matter’. Its pronouncements on sexuality are almost invariably negative. It seldom has anything to say about science and technology. As to art, the Church has long ceased to be a nursery for innovation. Instead, we have retreated into a spiritual cave, a retreat lauded and abetted by the world – whenever a bishop comments on politics, the world makes sure that it howls in protest. There are those interested in ‘Christianity *and* science’, or ‘Faith *and* art’; but the ‘and’ betrays that these are voices on the fringe of a fundamentally dualistic community, a community in which the witness of St. John and the Nicene Creed to the ‘enfleshment of the Word’ has long since fallen silent. In the mean time, alternative ‘spiritualities’ spring up; many of these are no less dualistic, leaving the world precisely where it is, in the grip of materialism.

If the Church is to lead the world out of rampant materialism, then she needs first to re-learn for herself what St. John and the Nicene Creed teaches – that matter matters, because it matters to God. A good starting point in this re-education is to realise that scientific discoveries since at least the turn of the twentieth century are constantly moving away from the picture of ‘brute matter’. ‘Stuff’ is ‘fine tuned’ to enable successive layers of complexity to emerge. And, as the distinguished palaeontologist Simon Conway Morris has argued (in his book *Life’s Solution* and his forthcoming published Gifford Lectures), the constraints on the process of evolution are so tight that the emergence of some form of sentient life very much like *homo sapiens* is probably almost inevitable in a cosmos like ours.

It was one of these *homo sapiens* living in first-century Palestine that the Creed affirms as the ‘enfleshed’ Son of God. Jesus’ *sarx* was made of star dust – heavy elements generated by nuclear reactions in long exploded stars, themselves the product of a primordial Big Bang. Each of his cells contained ‘mitochondria’, respiratory factories’ that once were free-living bacteria. And his genetic makeup was substantially the same as that of all higher animals (e.g. the chicken and human genomes are about 60% identical). In these and many other ways uncovered by modern science, this particular *anthropos* was indeed able to ‘gather up’ (or ‘recapitulate’ = ‘gather under one head’, the literal meaning of the Greek word used in Ephesians 1:10) ‘all things’. When, after his resurrection, Jesus ‘ascended into heaven’, he raised a transformed materiality to ‘the right hand of the Father’. The resurrection is the first fruit of the eschatological ‘gathering up’; the ascension is the final guarantor that ‘matter is not something to be cast aside as a transitory part of the journey of the spirit’, but rather be transformed ‘from glory into glory’ in a new creation not *ex nihilo*, but as the planned consummation of the first creation.

Theologically, therefore, the door is open for Christians to conceive of God creating a universe of fecund matter “with precisely those characteristics that are needed as preconditions for God’s act of new creation” (Denis Edwards, reporting the view of the scientist-theologian Robert John Russell). We inhabit a material universe in which, after more than four billion years of evolution, a creature emerges by ‘natural processes’ who is capable of freely choosing to love God without losing its creaturely individuality. The stage was then set, not for the discarding

of matter, but for the beginning of the consummation of matter in the 'enfleshment' of the Son of God.

The implication of this understanding is best summarised by Archbishop Temple. We have already quoted from his Glasgow Gifford Lectures; but the whole passage from where the previous quotation has been taken deserves to be reproduced in full:

It may safely be said that one ground for the hope of Christianity that it may make good its claim to be the true faith lies in the fact that it is the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions. It affords an expectation that it may be able to control the material, precisely because it does not ignore it or deny it, but roundly asserts alike the reality of matter and its subordination. Its own most central saying is, "The Word was made flesh", where the last term was, no doubt, chosen because of its specially materialistic associations. By the very nature of its central doctrine Christianity is committed to a belief in the ultimate significance of the historical process, and in the reality of matter and its place in the divine scheme.

In other words, Christians are unashamed materialists, but we are 'sublime materialists' – fully aware that the material was created with the potential to bear divinity, and that this potential has already been fully actualised once in the incarnate Son of God. Post-ascension, therefore, the Church has a mandate to be fully engaged with the material world, confident in the knowledge that it was indeed 'for us *anthropoi*', in our materiality, that the second person of the Trinity was 'enfleshed'.

5. Incarnation and Art

Many Christians are dismissive of any role for art in a life of Christian discipleship. Some immediately think of the stained glass in their local churches, and soon become dismissive. At most they see such windows as rather attractive background wallpaper: mere 'illustrations' of gospel stories that can in any case be more easily (and better) accessed through the biblical text itself. If their imaginations range more widely, they may well think of the 'high art' of the middle ages and Renaissance as at one extreme making too heavy intellectual demands on them and at the

other altogether too sentimental, as in the typical Christmas card. Art historians, clergy and traditional Reformation distrust of imagery have all combined to reinforce such attitudes. Scotland lost almost all its medieval art at the Reformation, and did not recover any tradition of religious art again until the nineteenth century. Even then examples were few and far between. Meanwhile, art historians in any case preferred to talk of the development of particular artistic styles rather than what religious meaning the painter was trying to convey, while clergy have in general endorsed such attitudes by finding beauty in buildings or art as only of instrumental value, as in the typical (but artificial) contrast that is to be found in the adage, 'it is the people who matter, not the building'.

Yet, ironically, it is the central doctrine of the Christian faith that itself points to a much higher evaluation of artistic endeavour. Even as early as the eighth and ninth centuries of our era when the first major confrontation over images took place (in the Christian East), defenders of icons such as John of Damascus had pointed out that God had in effect violated the second commandment by becoming incarnate, for he offered thereby nothing short of a self-portrait. That is one reason why in Eastern Orthodoxy to this day ancient icons are given special pride of place, since some are thought (almost certainly) wrongly to go back to the time of Christ himself. We need not go that far, but it is a salutary reminder to us that engagement with Christ can come no less effectively through contemplation of images as in the reading of words.

The intention of the gospel writers was of course not that we should simply leave their words on the page but rather use them to bring the incident alive in a picture before our minds with which we can then engage. So, similarly then, with paintings: despite an initial impression of a story being frozen at one narrow point in time, artists never intended their paintings to function in this way but rather to act as invitations to re-create the story for ourselves with their image as our primary building block. How that might be done with even the admittedly often second-rate that exists in so many of our churches is, sadly, now a forgotten skill. But perhaps a start could at least be made through more engagement by Christians with such art as is still being produced by Scots on the theme of Christ's significance. The three artists we have chosen here, as well as having established reputations, also reflect the range of attitudes to faith in contemporary Scotland.

Our first example is John Bellany. Born in 1942 in the fishing village of Port Seton just south of Edinburgh, examples of Bellany's work are now to be found in most of the municipal galleries of Scotland, as well as in London and New York. Mostly it is landscape and portraiture, but some of his earlier work in particular reflects his rebellion against the oppressive character of a devoutly Christian home that required attendance at church three times on a Sunday. *Scottish Family* and *Obsession* from the late 1960s adapt images of the nativity and crucifixion to suggest a guilt-ridden society, a theme that is already found in his *Allegory* of 1964 in which a gutted haddock hanging on the cross looms over the people below. His own life has not been without its problems. His self-mocking portrait of himself inside a wine glass (*Through a Glass Darkly* 1985) reflects his own drink problems that were to lead to a liver transplant, and more recently (in 2010) he went blind. He would now call himself 'a daylight atheist,' itself a sad reflection on the fact that it is the guilt and fear of the night-time that alone seems to give him some residual inclination to belief. Yet that should press all the more effectively upon us who remain Christians the need to enter such paintings imaginatively, to see how badly wrong communication of the faith can go.

A younger Christian artist who much admires Bellany's work is Peter Howson. Born in London in 1958, he and his family moved to Ayrshire in 1962 and he has remained in Scotland ever since. It was in the 1980s that he first came to prominence as part of the group sometimes known as the New Glasgow Boys that also included Stephen Campbell, Ken Currie and Andrian Wiszniewski. However, it was not till his time as an official war artist for the Imperial War Museum during the Bosnian War in 1993 that serious engagement with Christianity through his art can first be detected, as in paintings like *Ustazi* or *Plum Grove*. That interest was soon to become a major theme, as with his *Stations of the Cross* exhibition in St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow in 2004 or his 2010 commission of the painting of the martyr St. John Ogilvie for the Roman Catholic cathedral in the same city. Some find the harshness of his figures off-putting, and in particular his treatment of women has been described as 'adolescent.' But his intentions are undoubtedly serious: to reflect partly the grittiness of the grimmer aspects of working-class Glasgow life, with dossers, boxers and 'patriots' all appearing prominently, and partly his own background, for example his tough, brutal experience of army life as a young man.

Stations of the Cross
With kind permission of Peter Howson

Stations of the Cross
With kind permission of Peter Howson

Images of Crucifixion
With kind permission of the Chapter of Truro Cathedral
Photo credit – Peter Smith

Images of Crucifixion
With kind permission of the Chapter of Truro Cathedral
Photo credit – Peter Smith

It is with such a world that Jesus is then identified, sometimes movingly as in his *Ecce Homo*, and sometimes more starkly. The illustrations we include here reflect precisely those concerns. The harshness of Christ's face may appear altogether too much to some readers, but, if so, two points need to be remembered: first, there is a long tradition in northern European art of stressing the extent of Christ's suffering; secondly, the severity of the lines on his face indicate strong identification with the grim lives that continue to be led in some parts of our Scottish cities. Although Howson still describes himself as a Protestant, the influence of his Catholic fiancée has become notable in recent years, reflecting his concern that Protestant Christians have on the whole failed to treat his religious art with sufficient seriousness. It is a lament with which an essentially middle-class church like ours needs to heed. Howson refuses to let us off the hook: it was with the lowest segments of society that Christ is most commonly seen to be engaging, and we prettify these scenes to our own cost.

Hope is usually only hinted at in Howson's work, perhaps reflecting his own quite hard life that has included addiction to drink and drugs and diagnosis as someone suffering from Asperger's Syndrome. A quite different character was the recently deceased Craigie Aitchison (d.2009). Born in 1926 the son of an Edinburgh lawyer, he lived most of his life in London. However, his grandfather had been a Church of Scotland minister, and this is perhaps the ultimate source of the artist's repeated return to the theme of the crucifixion, despite his own agnosticism. All his paintings in this genre are quite distinctive. Frequently one of his Bedlington hounds is represented staring at the cross on which Christ often hangs without arms. That might suggest an intention to represent an essentially tragic figure, unable to escape his own suffering. But there are a number of indicators that suggest that for at least some of these paintings a quite different meaning is intended, something more like the message of the resurrection. Not only is Christ occasionally off the cross and at times the Holy Spirit as dove hovers above him, but also, more centrally, the colour of the sky behind is often used to indicate optimism and hope. Indeed, a shaft of light sometimes strikes the cross itself. The St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art in Glasgow has a very fine example. Indeed, its scale is such that it has become the major representative piece for our faith in that building.

There were few commissions from the churches during his life, but one such is to be found in Truro Cathedral. Illustrated here, it consists of

four representations of the cross placed behind a large baptismal basin. The four tell the story of the crucifixion and its significance for the baptised, and so end with the cross empty. Most characteristic of Aitchison's work is the second that includes the presence of both dove and his beloved Bedlington. The art is deliberately naïve but the meaning left in no doubt, not least thanks to the golden shaft of light and the twinkling star. Aitchison's own lack of explicit faith might lead some to question the appropriateness of such a commission but the truth is that God sometimes works more widely than our own narrow prejudices might initially suppose. Indeed, one might argue that the ambiguities Aitchison places within his depictions better convey the essential mysteriousness of the resurrection than do many a more pedestrian approach offered by Christians. In these Christ often appears to step effortlessly out of the tomb, as though it were just an ordinary, everyday act rather than one that should evoke in us a profound sense of wonder or awe.

PART THREE

6. Incarnation and Eucharist

A 'seeker' walks into a Scottish Episcopal church for the first time. A Eucharist is in progress. What beliefs about God, Christ, His church and the Eucharist might s/he gather as the liturgical action unfolds? What for example, is the connection between the Jesus who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago and the 'God' who might be for the visitor only a vague longing, an idea veiled in a shadowy cloud of unknowing. What is the connection between that life lived then, and the people in this place now, as they sing, pray and share bread and wine, and later, coffee and biscuits or even cake, in the name of the Risen Christ? Where is the 'real presence' of Christ located or manifest according to what is said and done? Crucially, what, if anything, about this particular form of worship might draw the visitor into an authentic experience of the Incarnate Lord?

The 'official' service books of 1970 and 1982 are explicit in locating the presence of Christ in the gathered assembly, the mind and heart of the individual believer and the Eucharistic action. Throughout the Liturgy the ancient greeting recalls the believer to a mindfulness of this reality;

'The Lord be with you '
'And With Thy spirit'

'The Lord is here '
'His spirit is with us '

The Anglican canon of hymns sung at the Eucharist, according to the consistency principle in prayer and belief of *lex orandi lex credendi*, demonstrate and encourage belief that God is truly present with us in various modes. The Introit might set the scene with David Evans' popular contemporary hymn which declares that God in Christ is believed to be present in the assembly:

*Be still, for the presence of the
Lord The Holy One is here!
Come bow before Him now
With reverence and fear!*

The content of hymns at the offertory might further confirm to our visitor, the belief of the gathered assembly in the church as the Body of Christ, here relating to the Eucharist itself.

*Alleluia! King eternal, Thee the Lord of lords we own;
Alleluia! born of Mary, Earth thy footstool, Heav'n Thy throne:
Thou within the veil hast entered, robed in flesh our great
High Priest;
Thou on earth both priest and victim in the Eucharistic Feast.*

Where the offertory hymns perhaps focus on the corporate and *universal* nature of the presence of Christ, the communion hymns tend to reflect a personal devotion to and expectation of the 'real' presence of Christ in the soul of the believer.

*King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth He stood
Lord of Lords, in human vesture -
in the body and the blood -
He will give to all the faithful
his own self for heavenly food.*

The Eucharistic prayers, here in the Scottish 1982 Liturgy, make clear the connection between the Incarnate Lord and the Action of the Eucharist.

*In Christ your Son our life and yours
are brought together in a wonderful exchange.
He made his home among us
that we might for ever dwell in you ...*

*Hear us, most merciful Father,
and send your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon this bread and this wine,
that overshadowed by his life giving power,
they may be the Body and Blood of your Son
Help us who are baptised into the fellowship of Christ's Body
to live and work to your praise and glory;*

The teaching on Presence in these texts represents a traditional thread of doctrine on the connection between the incarnation and the

Eucharist dating back to the first century. Later St. Leo the Great in the fifth century was to state that “What was visible in Our Saviour has entered into the sacraments”.

To seek to know the mind and practice of the early church, as we have already seen, is an enterprise fraught with difficulty. When we look at the liturgical and dogmatic texts we would hope to view descent of a uniform tradition, but instead we find a cluster of views and practice which may conflict with our assumptions about the homogeneity (and the unity) of our forebears in the faith. Nevertheless, we can discern a predominant view of the connection between the incarnation and the Eucharist in these early texts which is reflected in contemporary Anglican tradition and practice and indeed to a certain extent in the official ecumenical texts of, for example, the World Council of Churches.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul sees in the celebration of the Holy Communion and the Agape supper the locus of the presence of Christ with his Body. In his strongly worded admonition to the congregation that they are failing to recognise and understand the significance of the ordinance of Jesus at the Last Supper we see the beginning of a 'high' doctrine of the Real Presence. Luke affirms that the disciples know Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread. The discourse on the Bread of Life in John's Gospel is charged with Eucharistic significance for the theologians and Fathers of the early church.

The presence of Christ in the body of believers is attested in the very early manual of church practice known as the *Didache*, which some scholars date as early as the New Testament writings themselves.

As this broken bread was scattered on the mountains, and having been gathered together became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth to your kingdom; for yours is the power, the glory and the kingdom, for ever and ever Amen.

Ignatius of Antioch early in the second century refers to the Eucharistic elements as the 'Medicine of immortality', though he speaks of the *sarx*, the flesh of Christ, in the Johannine way rather than Body in the sense in which it is used in the *Didache*.

Justin Martyr, at Rome, (died 167) is quite clear about the connection.

We do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by a word of God, had flesh and blood for our salvation, so that we have learned that the food made a Eucharist by a word of prayer that comes from Him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished, by change are the flesh and blood of the Incarnate Jesus.

By the time of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (d. 202) this position was in need of defence, indicating the existence of alternative views. He writes in his treatise *Against all Heresies*:

In the same manner in which you ascribe to the Eucharist only the value of a symbol, so also the incarnation is reduced by you to mere appearance: there is not more flesh in the one than in the other. The incarnation does not differ from the Eucharist.

It is perhaps worthy of note, that in times of persecution, the martyrs, among whom Justin and Irenaeus are numbered, found solace in the teaching that they were suffering with Christ in His Passion. The names of the martyrs were recalled at the Eucharist which was often celebrated on their tombs. Is it too fanciful to suppose that those who felt they 'might be next' found a strength and reliance on the presence of the incarnate Christ in the Eucharist? A century later St. Ambrose of Milan (d.397) was using this parallel:

Let us use examples: with the example of the incarnation let us explain the truth of the Mystery (the Eucharist).

For many of the Fathers including St. Augustine of Hippo (d 430) the *mysterion* of 1 Timothy 3:16 had a Eucharistic overtone. Indeed the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek word *mysterion* was *sacramentum*.

Later theologians taught a correspondence between the action of the Liturgy and the historic events of the life of Our Lord, from the Nativity to the Resurrection. Here is St. Leo the Great again, on Christmas:

The birthday of the Head is the birthday of the Body. The birthday of Our Lord is not only a date in history. It enters our lives as a reality when He is born anew to us in the Liturgy.

St. John of Damascus wrote in the eighth century:

Since we know that the Word has formed for Himself a body from His pure and immaculate Virgin Mother, is it not therefore conceivable that He can form for Himself a body from bread and blood from wine?

The connection between the Passion and sacrificial death of Christ and the Consecration Prayer of the Eucharist is made movingly in a prayer of St. Gregory of Nazianzus preserved in the Ethiopian Liturgy.

*May there be opened the doors of light
May there be opened the doors of glory
May the veil be lifted from the face of the
Father, May the Lamb of God descend,
May it be placed upon the priestly table before me, a sinful servant,
May the song (the words of consecration) be sent, the fiery terrible
sword, May it appear upon this bread and the chalice.*

In this and other readings we may see the development of the theology of the 'unbloody sacrifice', which was to dominate and become the subject of so much contention in the controversies of the Reformation period.

If we fast forward rapidly to the era of the beginnings of a separate Episcopal Church in Scotland we see a church which finds its strength and focus in a spiritual life graced and formed by this ancient Eucharistic worship. The persistence of the Jacobite Scottish Episcopal Church in the time of persecution at the Reformation may perhaps be due solely, under God, to its fidelity to the concept of the centrality of Eucharistic worship in the life of the church. The liturgical and patristic scholarship of Thomas Rattray ensured that the 1739 Scottish Communion Office preserved the Eucharistic teaching of the early Eastern liturgies, notably the inclusion of the *epiclesis*, that is, the invocation of the Holy Spirit over the elements and people.

In the nineteenth century this devotion to the Eucharist is further strengthened by the teaching and witness of the Forbes brothers. Alexander Penrose Forbes, Bishop of Brechin, was actually summoned to an ecclesiastical trial for teaching a 'high' doctrine of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. His deeply incarnational view of the Eucharist was authenticated too by his devotion to the person of Christ in the poor and needy. While he was Bishop of Brechin, he served as pastor in a poor parish in Dundee where he ministered to the victims of a cholera epidemic. Seventy years later, in 1923 at the Anglo Catholic Congress, the words of Bishop Frank Weston expressed a vision of the role of the church in the world.

Christ is found in and amid matter - Spirit through matter; God in the flesh, God in the Sacrament you have got to come out from before your Tabernacle and walk, with Christ mystically present in you, out into the streets of this country and find the same Jesus in the people of your cities and your villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle, if you do not pity Jesus in the slum ... Jesus on the throne of his glory, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament Jesus received into your hearts in Communion, Jesus with you mystically as you pray, and Jesus enthroned in the hearts and bodies of his brothers and sisters up and down this country.

7. Incarnation and Sacrament

Finally, consideration of this Eucharistic aspect of our essay needs to begin, not immediately with incarnation, but with creation. Any view of the world which rests on a distinction between Creator and created, between uncreated Being and created beings, will ineluctably picture a world where sacramentality is built-in, as long as, that is, it is assumed that Creator and created seek relation with each other. For how is such relation to be established without something sacramental, some place where it is possible for different ways of being to meet and become related? And that is certainly the kind of world Christians believe they inhabit. Sacramentality at the heart of the Creation is demonstrated in the very first chapter of the Bible when we read in Genesis 1.27 that God *created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* It is described as the outcome of

God's clear intention to *make humankind in our image, according to our likeness* (Genesis 1.26). Perhaps we are to think of human beings as dynamic representations of God in the creation, embodying and enacting God's good intentions for His creation. Their dignity consists in this special relation to their Creator whose desires and intentions they bear in the created order. So, human being itself has a kind of sacramental potential and is endowed with that by its Creator. Incarnation, as understood in the Christian tradition, is about God's renewing and releasing that potential from within the human experience. It is about recreation and so can helpfully be seen in sacramental terms.

And this is in fact how the most recent eucharistic liturgy of our church encourages the faithful to see incarnation and to celebrate it. *In Christ your Son our life and yours are brought together in a wonderful exchange. He made his home among us that we might for ever dwell in you.* So runs part of the preface to the standard Eucharistic Prayer in *The Scottish Liturgy* of 1982. It is a theme also picked up in the Preface of the Alternative Prayer for Advent: *In Christ your Son the life of heaven and earth were joined.* In these prayers, and so in the worship of the faithful, Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, is understood as the meeting place of divine and human life, of uncreated and created being, for the true flourishing of the latter and, we may dare to think, for the joy and delight of the former. And, if one definition of a sacrament is just that – a place where divine and human being are brought together for the transformation of human life and the delight of the divine – well, then, the Word made flesh, the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ our Lord, is *the* sacrament, one might even say the mother of all sacraments. Everything else that we call a sacrament in the life of the church has its origin there, in Christ. They are given in the ongoing life of Christ's community as means of drawing us into that sacrament which is Christ, in whom we are restored in the image and likeness of God.

We move from sacrament in creation, through sacrament in incarnation to the sacramental life of the church. The implications of this journey are far-reaching and go well beyond the particular sacramental experience of the Christian community. The Incarnate Word partakes of the materiality of the creation and of its human component, but also of the divine, uncreated, immaterial life. Therefore He speaks of the goodness in God's eyes of the material and of human life, especially in their God-bearing capacities – something of which we spoke at greater length in an earlier Grosvenor Essay, *Towards a Theology of Science*, and also of the

unending faithfulness of God to all that he has made. In Christian belief it is the faithfulness of God to *all* that is created that uncovers and releases its dignity, worth and sacramental capacity to be God-bearing. And the incarnation of the Word of God is at the core of that belief.

FURTHER READING

D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948).
Now an old book, but still very readable and useful as an introduction to the subject. Good Scottish theology!

Denis Edward, 'Hope for Creation After Darwin: The Redemption of "All Things"', Chapter 10 in *Theology after Darwin*, edited by Michael S. Northcott and R. J. Berry (London: Paternoster, 2009).
An informative essay that sets out the theological case for the future of matter in the context of modern science. References to other literature in this essay provide a good starting point for further reading.

Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Scholars Press, 1989).
A landmark book by a Black American, challenging the assumption by white feminists that they are speaking for all women. Grant writes that Christ "found in the experiences of Black women, is a Black woman."

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Six British feminist theologians debate the possibility of being both feminist and Christian, their views depending, in large part, on their understanding of the nature of God incarnate.

Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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A controversial book in its day, by excellent and largely Anglican theologians, which asks whether the idea of the incarnate God is not another of those old Christian doctrines which needs to be criticized and interpreted afresh in the modern world.

William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1994).

Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

A collection of essays, including many of Soskice's classics, exploring God as our 'kin', as one who became like us so that we become brothers and sisters of Christ, and adopted children of the 'Father'.

Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*. New Edition (London: SCM, 2002).

This is perhaps the best and most accessible introduction to the Creeds available.